

Standing On Their Shoulders: Honoring Your Chapter's Past



Every association chapter starts with a thought. Before your chapter became a formal organization with a mission, vision, services and an active membership, a small group of people, or maybe just a single person, saw a gap. Something was missing from their work or personal life—connection, professional development, community or something else entirely. And when they couldn't find an organization already delivering what they needed, they decided to build it themselves.



Your founding members, and the board members who have come after them, have invested their time, energy and passion hoping that what they give their all to would outlast them and benefit people they'd never meet. Every success your chapter experiences today, every event, every member relationship, every piece of professional credibility for the chapter and individual members, is built on what they started.

It's worth pausing to remember where, and who, your chapter came from. And thinking about how you can honor all the individuals who started the chapter, played a role in its growth and impacted your industry.

Remember the original vision

Think about the challenges your founders faced getting your chapter started. They didn't have any sort of structure to imitate or processes to follow. Who knows if they even expected anyone to show up to their first event. They took a chance. And, from that first chance, they grew something real, built programs from scratch and grew into a chapter with visibility and impact.

Ask your board members and general membership to think about what they know about the founding of your chapter. Has your chapter evolved so much since those humble beginnings that no one remembers the original gap? Have you forgotten the problems the founders were trying to solve? Once you learn what people know, think about how you can fill in the holes. What kinds of things can your chapter do to celebrate all your founders did to start the chapter and provide you with the starting point to accomplish all you do today?

Show appreciation to those who came before

It's pretty easy to create lasting ways to say thank you to those who built your organization. And those who continue to strengthen it.

Several of our clients, all chapters of the National Bar Association, have named their chapters after prominent members of their communities, including The Norman S. Minor Bar Association Chapter and the D. Augustus Straker Bar Association Chapter. The Straker chapter was named, according to their website, in honor of D. Augustus Straker, a "pioneering African American attorney, author and jurist."

Other ideas for memorializing your founders and those who came before include:

- Share stories about the leaders who shaped your chapter culture, who they were in addition to what they did, for your chapter and for your industry. Post them on your website and social media and in your newsletter. An oral history project or an anniversary retrospective publication is another great way you can capture their stories. If they're still living, invite them to share these stories, in person or via video.



- Establish repeating scholarships, awards and leadership program in their names. These are solid ways to turn appreciation into a lasting, visible imprint rather than just a one-off gesture. A scholarship aimed at supporting emerging professionals or future chapter leaders can both honor where the chapter came from and invest in its future, connecting their original hopes for the organization to the members who will carry it forward. Establish a scholarship fund in a founder's name or name a signature event after them, like a "Joe Smith Leadership Breakfast."
- Consider an annual Founder's Award or a Board Member Emeritus designation for long-serving leaders. A Founders Wall if you have a physical location or a history page on your chapter website keeps their stories at the forefront.

And to keep past leaders engaged rather than retiring and severing ties with the chapter entirely, create a Founders Circle advisory council and invite former board members to induct new board members, to turn this recognition into an ongoing tradition.

Looking ahead to honor a chapter's past

Great chapters are an accumulated effort from everyone, past, present and future. By honoring the founders, appreciating the leaders who carried the torch since and investing deliberately in those who will carry it next, chapters can ensure that the original hope behind their founding continues to thrive.

